

## **Farm bill isn't perfect, but it has something for everybody**

By Mike McGraw  
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The Rev. Jim Mullins of Pickens, S.C., can finally die in peace, thanks to last week's long-awaited enactment of the federal farm bill.

It's not that Mullins was anxious about Congress's marathon debate about food stamps and crop subsidies. It's just that the Korean War veteran wants a place to rest his tired old bones when he finally slips from this mortal coil.

President Barack Obama made that possible a week ago when he signed the legislation that, among other things, allows Mullins and his relatives to buy back their 0.6-acre family cemetery in Pound, Va., grabbed up by Uncle Sam years ago and made part of the Jefferson National Forest.

Mullins may be one of the few beneficiaries of the law who actually will give money back to the government.

True, the legislation does cut \$8 billion in food aid for low-income families over 10 years and eliminates \$5 billion in subsidies to farmers.

But a scan of the 1,000-page law by The Star and others shows that it provides plenty of bounty for plenty of recipients, some of them surprising.

There seem to be benefits in the law for everyone: maple syrup producers, sheep herders, reindeer and Christmas tree farms, bee keepers and the Atlantic spiny dogfish.

The animal welfare crowd will find a "prohibition on attending an animal fight or causing (a minor) to attend an animal fight."

Taxpayers for Common Sense, a nonpartisan, fiscally conservative think tank, has found numerous special-interest provisions, including a section on temperate japonica rice (sushi rice), adding it as an eligible crop for government-guaranteed prices.

“With each new farm bill, it seems like Congress tries to buy off more special-interest groups,” said Chris Edwards, an economist with the nonpartisan Cato Institute, a limited government think tank.

The Congressional Budget Office says the 10-year, \$1 trillion law would lower budget deficits by \$16.6 billion over the decade, but budget-watchers say it also represents a 37 percent increase in funding over the last farm bill.

### Crop of critics

Most everyone agrees America needs a farm bill. It’s our primary agriculture and food policy tool, created under the New Deal to bail out Dust Bowl farmers and feed a desperate nation.

“Did I love every single thing in the 1,000-plus pages of the farm bill?” asked U.S. Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, a Kansas City Democrat who said he read the whole thing. “Of course not, but I believe in the course of compromise, this bill is both very necessary and very good for Missouri’s 5th District.”

But there are plenty of harsher critics.

The conservative Club for Growth and Heritage Action denounced the bill as anti-conservative.

While the American Farm Bureau Federation likes many parts of the law, the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association is dismissive. It is especially angry that the law requires meatpackers to label products from foreign countries.

“This farm bill is foundationally flawed, and the livestock sector is standing shoulder-to-shoulder in opposition,” it said in a statement.

Smaller farmers looking for niche markets aren’t all that happy with the law, either.

“Just more of the same subsidies going to big agriculture and more of the same fake food,” said Kansas cattle rancher Mike Callicrate, who says he’s trying to build “a healthy alternative to the extractive industrial food system.”

Members of Congress from Kansas, a primary beneficiary of the law, voted against it almost to a person.

“In the end, the bill was too big,” said a statement from Rep. Kevin Yoder, a Kansas Republican.

There were some cuts, such as to food stamps, which still make up 80 percent of the total cost.

North Korea’s Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un will find that Section 3015 prohibits U.S. food assistance to his country.

The law also calls for deep cuts in subsidies to farmers, but it also opens the dam on a whole new river of federal spending: insurance.

In fact, much of the money saved from eliminating direct payments to farmers has been redirected to expanded crop insurance, through which taxpayers will spend an additional \$5.7 billion on insurance over the decade to help cover farmers for losses from poor yields or low commodity prices.

“It is really remarkable,” said Craig Cox, of the Environmental Working Group.

In essence, he said, the law prevents the secretary of agriculture from renegotiating potentially lucrative agreements with 18 insurance companies that are paid \$1.4 billion annually by the government to sell policies to farmers.

In addition, taxpayers pony up 62 percent of farmers’ premiums.

“The insurance companies harvest underwriting gains, and taxpayers take on most of the losses,” Cox said.

Farmers aren’t the only recipients of the amped-up insurance plans.

Food companies that must recall tainted products will get “priority consideration” for taxpayer-subsidized food safety recall insurance.

At the same time, the law continues to hide the identities of recipients of crop insurance payments.

Cox says such secrecy keeps taxpayers in the dark about insurance subsidies that benefit the largest and most successful farmers, and likely some members of Congress.

“That’s simply indefensible,” he said.

Peanuts to popcorn

There is a smorgasbord of other programs — many of them needed while others, some argue, are not.

For coffee drinkers, there’s federally funded research to combat the coffee berry borer, which is a big pain for coffee farmers in Hawaii — the only place in the U.S. where it’s grown. Some have lost their entire crops.

There’s money for weather information transmitters operated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Popcorn was added at the last minute as being eligible for subsidies.

Sen. Jerry Moran, a Kansas Republican, the only member of the Kansas delegation to vote for the bill, helped push through an amendment giving alfalfa consideration for crop insurance. Alfalfa is a key crop, and producers need an incentive to plant more of it, Moran said.

Cleaver said the law's supplemental livestock disaster program is vital to drought-stricken Missouri livestock producers.

Over in Illinois, Republican Rep. Aaron Schock helped add pennycress, a plant used in biodiesel fuel production, to the plethora of new crops eligible for crop insurance.

Back in Virginia, all Mullins ever wanted was the right to buy back the family cemetery, which contains as many as 50 graves, some dating back to the late 1700s.

Unlike the full-time Washington lobbyists on the farm bill — who were able to get their favorite carve-outs added in a year or two — it took Mullins and his family 13 years to get their small family cemetery back.

“I feel it was a terrible injustice to have to go through that,” Mullins said.

“Some years ago, we asked the government if we could pay out of our own pockets to build a road up to it, and then they sent us bills for using the road we had built.”

Mullins said a forest ranger finally tipped him off that the only way to get it back would be through an act of Congress.

His congressman tried floating separate measures, but nothing ever got passed.

Then a senior staffer for Rep. Morgan Griffith, a Virginia Republican, got the idea to add it to the farm bill. It became officially known as Section 8306, “Land conveyance, Jefferson National Forest ...”

After the land is assessed, the family will buy it back for a fair price.

As for the access road, Mullins said the government has agreed to give the family “perpetual use with no charge.”

“That’s well and good,” Mullins said this week, “and I feel vindicated. But I don’t trust the government to give us perpetual anything.”

Even so, Mullins now says he’ll take his final, perpetual rest in the Mullins and Sturgill Cemetery in Wise County, Va.

“I will certainly be buried there if the rapture doesn’t come first,” he said. “I will be buried next to my baby sister, Geraldean.”

As for the rest of the farm bill? “I have some trouble with the fact that they tack on so many things that maybe should not be in there,” Mullins said.

“But I think I have the only section that’s trying to give money back rather than take money from them.”